

Exile One (1 Peter 1:1-2)

The Situation

Imagine the ancient civilization of Northern Turkey. Greek culture and the Roman Empire, from their positions just across the Aegean Sea, in Europe, have begun to heavily influence your community. Roman roads, taxation, and military are ever-present. And so is Greek thought. Everyone has gone along with it—and times seem to be improving. The age is heading in a specific direction, and you are caught up in its wave.

Then, one day, with no forewarning, a messenger arrives in your small town. He is not there to trade like all the other travelers. Instead, he has news to proclaim. It isn't a decree from Caesar but information about a man named Jesus. There is a God, Jesus is him, and he became one of us, the preacher declares. Then, Jesus died as a substitute for us, rising on the third day. And as the glorious gospel is declared to you, you find yourself agreeing—you believe in and want this Jesus. His Spirit fills you, and now, your life is changed.

You find yourself as part of a new community within your community. You and the other Christians gather as one on Sundays and in smaller settings throughout the week. As you all study the Scriptures and worship the God who wrote them, you relearn everything. Soon, you realize your new views and lifestyle are incongruent with the Roman and Greek way you'd previously adopted.

And you aren't the only one to recognize you're different. Soon, your town begins to see it too. They suspect you don't think like them,

and they certainly can see you don't live like them. People in your community have always represented all sides of thought, but you and the other Christians have embraced something different than everyone else in town. Jesus is your King. He is worthy of your worship. And he asks you to both love others and tell them about him.

But your differences soon lead the majority to turn against you. Their rejection isn't catastrophic, but subtly, they turn their backs on you. You worry that you might be physically harmed for your Christianity one day, mainly because they are willing to say such angry and hateful words about you and your Lord. You can't tell where all this venom is coming from—you've tried hard to love and contribute to your community—but the animosity is growing. You feel confused as to what to do. The Roman Senate and Emperor seem unconcerned with your small minority, and the concern they do show indicates they might begin blaming you for their failures.

You and others in the community begin to worry. Will we lose our sources of income? Will we be roundly rejected from public discourse? Will this ridicule turn into laws that call for our persecution? Will we be harmed? And, if any of this happens to us, how should we live?

Just as your questions and the pressure hit a fever pitch, a new messenger arrives. He is a Christian named Silvanus, and he has come from Rome (1 Peter 5:12-13). You know there are Christians there, so you wonder how they are dealing with the rising opposition to the faith in the mother of all cities. How are they handling increasing hostility and blame from culture? Are they fighting back? Are they retreating to the countryside? Are they conforming to the demands of the populace?

Silvanus proceeds to tell you he has a letter from no less than Peter, a letter designed to show you how to live when society rejects you. You can't believe it—Peter!

You, of course, know the name. He was Jesus' top apostle, the leader of the twelve, the first preacher the day the church was born, and the one with the keys to unlock the gospel to the Gentile world. And he did. Ten years after Jesus died and lived again, Peter died to his preferences and spoke the words of life to a small group of Gentiles on Israel's northern coast. And, when they believed, the Spirit fell. Everyone saw it, and soon it was confirmed—the good news is for the Gentile world. That's how the gospel eventually got to you. And now,

Peter has written to you and other Christians along the trade route of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1:1).

The next morning, Sunday, you gather with all the other Christians in your church. After some prayer and singing to God, Silvanus stands up before you with a papyrus scroll in his hand. He unfurls it, prays, and begins to read:

“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.” (1 Peter 1:1–2)

1. The Author: Peter

The first thing I want you to notice is the author of our letter. As I've said, Peter was the first apostle, but in this letter, he is the first exile. By this time, it seems Peter had abandoned the comforts and confines of Jerusalem for Rome. Jerusalem was familiar; Rome was unknown. Jerusalem was filled with people from the same cultural background; Rome was filled with every nation, tribe, and tongue. Jerusalem's morals were similar to Christianity's; Rome's morals were upside down and non-existent. In Jerusalem, Peter had influence—so many had come to Jesus there—but in Rome, Peter was without power or status of any kind.

And Peter felt the strangeness of his new town. At the close of this letter, he calls Rome “Babylon” (5:13). This is his way of referencing time in Israel's history when they were carried away as exiles to Babylon. Life was so different there, and godlessness abounded. How in the world could they live there?

To help those ancient Old Testament exiles, God had sent the Prophet Jeremiah. Peter seems to have emulated Jeremiah's spirit in the way he penned 1 Peter. Jeremiah told the ancient exiles to submit to the life of exile by building houses, planting gardens, marrying, and establishing

families right there in Babylon. He even said:

“Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” (Jeremiah 29:7)

Peter would have agreed. Jeremiah then went on to warn God’s people about false prophets who would tell them to escape their exile. These liars would convince God’s people that God didn’t want his kids living in such conditions. But, Jeremiah told them, God wanted them to submit to exile until God rescued them.

“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

Again, Peter would have agreed—and Peter seems to have styled his letter after Jeremiah’s ministry. All through his correspondence, Peter encourages the church to endure periods of exile well in Christ’s name.

- First, he will tell us of the joy of being called into exile (1 Peter 1:1-2:10). We belong to Jesus and have a great salvation, so we rejoice even in suffering for his name.
- Second, Peter will tell us of the life of exile, describing how we must live (2:11-3:7). He will urge us to abstain from sin, submit to authority, and do work and family for God’s glory.
- Third, Peter will talk to us about the pain of the exile (3:8-4:19). Everyone suffers, but believers might suffer for righteousness. If we hear the ridicule or feel the fists of those hostile to Christ, we must endure.
- And fourth, Peter will describe the community the exile must build (5:1-14). The church is our new home, and we must press into it all the more as rejection increases. The idea of doing the Christian life alone becomes even more impossible for exiled

believers.

Peter referred to himself in this letter as an “Apostle of Jesus Christ.” When Paul said it at the beginning of his letters, it often indicated he would have to defend his position or correct his audience. But when Peter says it, no one argued. If Peter wasn’t an apostle, no one was an apostle. He held the special position Jesus reserved for his initial and authoritative witnesses and authors of the truth.

But, as an apostle, Peter was Exile #1. He knew what it was to be an outcast from society because of Jesus. You could say he learned about being rejected from both the right and left because of his belief in Christ. The right, fashioned by Judaism, did not like the grace and forgiveness for all nations Peter preached. And the left, formed by much of Roman society, did not like the restrictive morality Peter taught. And neither liked to think of Jesus as Lord. For that, Pete is Exile #1 in this letter.

2. The Recipients: Elect Exiles of the Dispersion

Who Was Peter’s Audience?

The second thing I want you to see in these introductory verses is the recipients. Peter called them “elect exiles of the Dispersion” in an area we know as Northern Turkey. The title is Jewish because the Assyrians and Babylonians dispersed and made exiles of ancient Israel. Scattered Jews began to be known as the Diaspora.

But Peter takes that title and lays it firmly on the Jewish *and* Gentile church of that region and era. We know he is writing to a predominantly Gentile church because of the way he describes their lives before Christ. They had lived sensuously, following their passions, in their old life. They had partied hard, intoxicating themselves and engaging in the kinds of acts alcohol emboldens. Peter says these Christians had been ransomed from “futile ways” previous generations had taught them, and now they’d become God’s people (1:18; 2:10).

This helps us know what made them into exiles. It’s what makes us exiles today. First, they believed things that made them exiles. Second, they lived in a way that made them exiles. Both their beliefs

and lifestyles were looked down upon by their larger society, so they became exiles.

You might suspect that we cannot relate to whatever marginalization they endured. It is common for Western churches to reflect on the lack of persecution we have historically received. For many centuries, many Western nations have had a policy of giving the church favored status. Sometimes this meant the church had political influence, sometimes it meant it ruled over monarchs, but, usually, it meant a nominal Christianity was encouraged to spread. Many people were Christian in name only.

Though the Church had influence in these Western societies, secularism has now taken the lead. Still, since so many identify as Christian in name, Christianity grips onto a semi-favored status. I think the evidence demonstrates that many who say they are Christian are not. Many who say they are Christians also say they don't believe in the gospel of God and also don't even attend, let alone belong to, a local church of any kind. The number of people who believe the gospel, hold the cardinal doctrines of Christianity, and live out their faith by being part of a church and following Scripture's teachings in their private lives is small.

But, in places like these, because of the historical relationship with the church, the persecution is not yet physical. Christians in many nations are beaten and economically disadvantaged because of their faith, but this hasn't happened broadly yet in the Western world. So we might be tempted to tune out 1 Peter because they certainly had a level of persecution worse than ours.

Not so fast. The hostility described in this letter is verbal slander and malicious accusations. Peter used this letter to prepare people for times when the world would "speak against" them "as evildoers" (2:12). He said the church's goodness "should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people" (2:15). He urged his audience not to repay "reviling for reviling," but to bless instead (3:9). And he told them to have "a good conscience, so that when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame" (3:16).

Hearing those descriptions should make us realize we are entering into the kind of territory Peter thought his readers were in. I heard of a Christian man recently who was on a company softball team. They always had a great time together, and everyone knew he was a believer.

But one night, he hopped on Facebook and was horrified to watch most of his teammates berating Christians and ridiculing the Christian faith as little more than belief in fairies and goblins. You could go online and find a thousand examples of similar behavior.

This brand of ridicule has always been around. And, though it's difficult to know precisely what people were saying about the first-century Christians Peter wrote to, we do have a piece of Roman graffiti scratched into plaster on a building in Rome during the second century. It is a picture of a man with a donkey's head being crucified. Another man is raising his hand in worship toward the figure on the cross. Then a caption reads, "Alexamenos worships his god." I think it even had a hashtag.

They Were God's Special People

But Peter wanted to comfort his audience, an audience I hope you now realize includes you and me, with something special. All through the letter, he encourages us with the truth about who we are. And he alludes to our identity in this brief introduction.

The overarching encouragement Peter gives comes from his description of these exiles in the very first verse—**elect** (1:1). To be elect means we are recipients of God's grace, those God has called to his love. He has prompted us to trust him, and we have received his call.

This is not a theme meant to spin you out or shake your faith. It is not meant to be taken out of context and placed into a sterile or unfeeling theological system. No way. It is meant as a cause of celebration! God chose Adam. God chose Noah. God chose Abraham. God chose Israel. And, if you are in Christ, God chose you.

And Peter wanted his readers to celebrate how the entire Triune God had chosen them. He did this by alluding to the Father, the Spirit, and the Son in our second verse.

What did the Father do? He elected us **according to the foreknowledge of God the Father** (1:2). I doubt this means God knew we would choose him, so he chose us. I suspect this means he knows us, knows his plans, and we are part of those plans. These suffering believers would've celebrated that the Father knew them and

his plans for them.

But what did the Spirit do? Peter tells us the **Spirit** sets us apart for **sanctification** (1:2). This word often refers to the process of spiritual growth during the Christian life, but it is used here to describe the act of setting us apart to God at the point of salvation. When these beleaguered Christians trusted Christ, the Spirit set them apart for God. Like a special dish used for a special purpose—I'm thinking of my daily coffee mug—God has set us aside for a special purpose. And this comforts us during times of persecution.

But what did the Son do? He chose us for **obedience** to him and for **the sprinkling of his blood** (1:2). This means we are chosen by God to receive the gospel of Christ, obey the King who is Christ, and declare the gospel of his blood to the world. These early believers would have been encouraged to know that their trials were not in vain. God had invited them in a mission for them based on all they'd believed about Jesus.

All this talk from Peter about our identity in God is meant to encourage us. If we feel alien to our world, at least we know God accepts us. If we feel we have fewer opportunities to root down in the culture, at least we know we have roots in God. And if we feel like we aren't given a place or purpose by society, at least we know God has given us his gospel and a mission to proclaim it.

These original hearers would have been greatly encouraged to know that, despite all their trials and rejection and the difficulty of being a Christian in their world at that time, they belonged to God.

I don't know if you remember your first upside-down roller coaster ride. Maybe you haven't experienced one. I remember mine. It was called "The Demon" at Santa Clara's *Great America*. I was afraid, and the ride was tumultuous, but I was greatly comforted by the security the shoulder harness provided. I was firmly attached to the car, and the car was firmly attached to the track. I knew I would make it. In a similar way, as believers, we should know we are firmly attached to God when the persecution hits. The ride might be rough, but we are secure in him.

3. The Theme: The Grace of Exile

I want to conclude this chapter by focusing on the theme I have chosen for this study of 1 Peter—*The Grace of Exile*. I have taken this from the very end of this letter.

“By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it.” (1 Peter 5:12)

Peter saw his letter as an exhortation and declaration of the true grace of God. If you take the time to read it as we study it here, you’ll discover it’s a description of the life of exile. Hardships abound. Ridicule exists. Decisions to live unlike everyone else are present. And through it all, though it’s a life on the fringes, life as a religious minority, Peter says it’s a life of God’s true grace.

Grace means favor. And when living on the margins of society, rather than at the center of it, it’s hard to feel favored by God. But Peter wants us to get excited about the possibilities that come with being in the vast minority. The scales of dead religion and nominal Christianity fall off because there’s no good reason for people to pretend to be Christians. What’s left is a purer, holier, more vibrant church. It might be smaller, but at least it’s not dead.

And I think this is a shift this book will help us make. It’s been a long time since the true church was the majority in the West, though we often don’t believe it. But we’ve got to shift from maintenance to mission, from settling to sojourning, from accepted to alien. It’s the only way forward, and for me, it feels exciting.

All that said, let me conclude by stating some goals for our study of 1 Peter. It is a very dense book, so I will move slowly through it. And here’s what I hope will happen as we meditate upon God’s Word.

1. **That we would learn to rejoice so much in what we have in Christ that we never compromise to get what we can of the world.** One of the greatest protections against theological or lifestyle error is being fully and completely satisfied in and with Christ.
2. **That we would learn better how to bless our community**

with the gospel. The days of people coming to church gatherings when searching are largely over. People with a church background might wander into our public gatherings, but this group is getting statistically smaller every year. We have to think more about how to go out to the “highways and hedges” with the gospel (Luke 14:23).

3. **That we would discover fresh biblical ways to build up our gospel community so that we can lean into each other during the difficult strain of social rejection.** One antidote to rejection from the larger community is the acceptance of Jesus’ community. I think we are moving well past the days of attending church twice a month as the total pushback to society’s pressures on us. We need more, so I hope this book reminds us of biblical strategies to cultivate a healthy community.
4. **That those in our church family who feel the strongest sense of social exclusion would be comforted by the life Peter describes.** I think of those of you serving and studying on university campuses. There is a strong intolerance of the Christian faith on many campuses and classrooms, so I pray this book will give you the encouragement you need, while giving you the wisdom and discernment to navigate your setting. And there are many similar environments, some physical, some corporate, and some digital, that I hope this book helps you learn to navigate as a Christian.

I believe 1 Peter can help us learn the grace of the exile life. We do not have to sinfully fight. We do not have to flee. We do not have to conform. Instead, we must “stand firm” in the grace Peter describes in this letter (1 Peter 5:12). May God bless us as we study his Word.

Study Questions

Head Questions

- How does Peter’s experience as “Exile #1” give him credibility to write this letter for persecuted Christians? What parallels existed between the exiles in Babylon and the persecuted Christians to whom Peter wrote?

- What does Peter mean when he calls his readers “elect exiles of the Dispersion”? What comfort would this description give them in the midst of their trials?
- What does Peter say that God the Father, God the Spirit, and God the Son each did in regard to choosing and setting apart believers? How might this theology encourage persecuted Christians?

Heart Questions

- How might the original readers have felt as they began to experience ridicule and exclusion from their community because of their Christian faith?
- As Peter reflects on his own experience of exile in Rome, what emotions do you think he was feeling? How might this have impacted his desire to write this letter?
- As you read this section, what feelings came up for you personally? Were there parts that resonated with your own experience of feeling like an outsider because of your faith?

Hands Questions

- Based on Peter’s example of enduring exile in Rome, what actions can you take to faithfully follow Christ even when it means facing ridicule or exclusion?
- Peter wants to remind persecuted Christians of their identity and mission as God’s chosen people (1:1-2). How should remembering your identity in Christ impact how you live this week?
- The end of the chapter talks about “learning the grace of exile.” What is one thing you can do this week to start learning how to live as an “exile” in your context?